

A Patient's Guide to Interstitial Brachytherapy at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Patient Information Series No 69

Pregnancy/fathering a child

Female patients must not be pregnant or become pregnant and male patients must not father a child during a course of radiotherapy or for some months afterwards. **Please discuss this with your cancer specialist.**

If you think there is a chance, however small, of you or your partner becoming pregnant during treatment, it is extremely important that you discuss this with your oncologist, radiographer or nurse as soon as possible.

Female Patients will be asked to confirm their pregnancy status prior to radiotherapy. This applies to all women between the ages of 12–55 years. This is a legal requirement.

Identification

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment sheet and your hospital name band each time you attend.

You must wear your name band at all times whilst in hospital.

Consent

It is a legal requirement to have a signed Consent Form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

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This leaflet has been written in collaboration with oncologists, health professionals, patients and carers at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

If you have difficulty reading this size of print, a version of this leaflet or any of our leaflets can be produced for you in a larger print — please ask.

Introduction

This leaflet aims to give patients the information they need before undergoing a course of interstitial brachytherapy. Although it cannot cover all the issues, it is intended as a guide to help you understand more about this particular treatment and the procedure involved.

There will be a team caring for you which will include doctors, nurses, physicists and radiographers. The cancer specialist is the doctor in charge of your care and throughout this leaflet we will refer to him / her as the Oncologist.

What is brachytherapy?

Brachytherapy is a form of radiotherapy given by introducing a radiation source directly to the part of your body that is to be treated. In the case of interstitial brachytherapy this may be into a cancer growing in the breast, the anal region, the vulva or the vagina. The treatment is delivered through temporary applicators implanted in the area to be treated. The source of radiation is a small iridium "pellet" that delivers the radiation dose as it passes through the applicators within the treatment area.

Brachytherapy implants may be recommended for some patients as the best way of delivering high dose radiation as it concentrates the radiation on the treatment area so that healthy sensitive parts of the body nearby receive a much lower dose.

Implants may be used as the primary treatment or may follow a course of external beam radiotherapy. The exact treatment regime, including the number of brachytherapy treatments you will receive, depends on the individual

cancer being treated. Your Oncologist will discuss with you the best combination of treatments in your particular case.

Your Brachytherapy Implant

Before the implant

The applicators are placed while you are under general anaesthetic, so you will be admitted to the ward the day before the procedure. You may need blood tests, an ECG and a chest X-ray if you have not had these tests done recently, to ensure that you can safely receive a general anaesthetic. You will not be allowed to eat or drink from midnight in preparation for theatre in the morning. If the area being treated is the vagina, vulva or anal areas, you may be given some medication to clear your bowels.

The implant

On the day of your implant you will be taken to theatre where you will be given a general anaesthetic. Fine plastic treatment tubes (applicators) will be passed into the area to be treated. The number of applicators placed will depend on the size of the area to be treated. An average implant requires 5-20 applicators.

When you wake up from the anaesthetic you will be aware of the applicators. Your skin in the area may feel a little stiff as the tubes are held in place by a template which is usually a flexible piece of plastic held on the skin by tape adhesive and stitched at the edges.

If the area being treated is the vagina, vulva or anal areas then a catheter will also have been placed into your bladder to drain urine.

After the implant

When the anaesthetist is happy for you to leave the theatre area you will be taken to a CT scanner or MRI scanner or both. Here images will be taken of the area to be treated so that your Oncologist can check that the applicators are in the correct position. Following your scans you will return to the ward where you will need to remain in bed.

Over the next few hours a team of physicists will calculate how long the radiation source needs to remain in each of your treatment applicators. Once this has been done, your brachytherapy is ready to be given.

First treatment

The first treatment is usually given in the late afternoon of the day on which you have the treatment applicators inserted. You will be taken to the brachytherapy suite on a trolley where you will be given your treatment.

The treatment applicators are measured to ensure that they have not moved. Provided that they are in the correct position, they are connected to a set of tubes which join them to the machine containing the radiation source (the brachytherapy machine).

Once this is completed the staff will leave the room and the treatment will start. However, they will be watching you on a TV monitor in the control area nearby and will be able to hear you by an intercom.

The brachytherapy machine will pass the radiation source down each treatment applicator in turn, for the calculated length of time that is needed to deliver the necessary

radiation dose. This usually takes a few minutes. You shouldn't feel any discomfort during treatment and will have no sensation of the radiation being delivered.

Following treatment

At the end of the treatment, the connecting tubes are removed from the treatment applicators, which will remain in place in your body until your course of treatment has been completed. You will then return to the ward.

It is important that you do not move or bend the area with the implant in place. Usually this means that you will have to rest quietly in bed but may sit up slightly to help with eating and reading. Please let your nurse know if you experience any discomfort from the continued bed rest or the treatment applicators, and you will be given medication to relieve this.

If the applicators are in the vulva, vagina or anal region then the catheter in your bladder will remain in place until your final treatment has been completed, after which it will be removed. You will be given medication so that you do not feel the need to open your bowels.

You will be able to have visitors on the ward as you are not radioactive.

Subsequent treatments

Subsequent treatments will normally take place on consecutive days but sometimes two treatments may be given on the same day with a six hour gap between treatments. A CT scan or MRI scan may be done prior to each day's treatment to check the position of the applicators.

You will be taken by trolley to the brachytherapy room and receive treatment whilst remaining on the trolley. The treatment process is exactly the same as the previous day.

Follow-up after your brachytherapy treatment

After the last treatment, the applicators and the catheter (if present) are removed. You do not need any sedation for this as they are removed very simply. Any stitches are removed and the plastic template is taken off your skin. It will feel like having a plaster removed.

There may be a little oozing of blood from the site where the applicators passed through the skin. You may find that you notice some bruising in the area for a few days afterwards.

Following your treatment you will return to the ward, and you may be allowed home the same day. However, if the area being treated is the vagina, vulva or anal areas you must be urinating without difficulty before being sent home. These patients may also notice some blood in your urine which is normal, but it should become clearer over the next few days.

You should not feel unwell after your brachytherapy but we advise you to arrange for a responsible adult to accompany you home as the treatment experience can be tiring. Please drink 1-2 litres of fluid each day.

Very occasionally a urine infection can develop. If you experience continued discomfort or bleeding on passing urine for more than a few days contact your GP or the wards at the cancer centre where you were treated.

What about any other side effects?

Following treatment you may get a reaction to the radiotherapy. The reaction will depend on the treatment dose and site treated.

Breast implant patients

Your treatment may result in the reddening of the skin overlying the area implanted. This area may become sore and itchy for 1-2 weeks following treatment. You may find the skin in the treatment area peels before healing. Please contact the cancer centre if you notice any discharge from the area.

Vulval and vaginal implant patients

Your treatment may result in the area around the vaginal opening becoming very sore, there may be a vaginal discharge and it may be uncomfortable to urinate. You will find that this improves over a few weeks but may require you to use a barrier cream and painkillers. Please discuss this with your nurse before your discharge from hospital.

Anal implant patients

Your treatment may result in soreness around the anal region especially when opening your bowels. This will improve over a few weeks and it will be important to ensure your stool is soft and to avoid constipation during this time. Please speak with your doctor and nurse before your discharge if you have concerns regarding pain management and your bowels.

Who do I contact if I have any concerns?

Once home if you have any questions or concerns about your recovery, please contact Mount Vernon Cancer Centre (see page 11).

Contacts

Brachytherapy Unit: (Mon-Fri 9-5)

Linda Bryant / Caroline Chapman: 01923 844 636

Professor Hoskin.....01923 844 533

Radiotherapy Clinic: 01923 844267 (Mon-Fri 8.30-5)

Marie Curie Ward: ..01923 844225 (Mon 7.30am-Fri 8pm)

Ward 10 (mainly for men) 01923 844042(24 hours)

Ward 11 (mainly for women) 01923 844043(24 hours)

Out of hours (9pm - 8am) call Mount Vernon Cancer Centre 01923 826 111 and ask for the on call registrar.

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC)
for cancer support and information: 01923 844014

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre

for cancer support & information
... supporting people affected by cancer...

This leaflet forms part of a series of publications produced by the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC).

If you would like further information about any aspect of cancer and its treatments, please drop in to the centre or call the Helpline.

The LJMC is staffed by healthcare professionals and trained volunteers and is part of the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

- Drop-in centre for support and information
- Telephone Helpline
- Benefits Advice *
- Pre-treatment visits *
- Complementary therapies *
- Relaxation classes
- Counselling *
- Support groups
- Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops

* These services are available to patients under the care of an NHS oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

Opening hours: Mon - Fri: 9.30am - 1.00pm & 2.00 - 4.30pm

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre
situated between the Cancer Centre and Gate 3 (White Hill)
Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2RN
Telephone Helpline: **01923 844014**
www.ljmc.org